

Philippians #2 - Keeping things in perspective

Bible Reading

Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

Philippians 1:12-26

In our introductory session, we looked at how the church in Philippi was created when Paul preached the gospel at a riverside prayer meeting, and how 10 years later Paul writes the letter we are studying while under arrest 800 miles away in Rome.

We then read and examined the first 11 verses of the first chapter, imagining what it would have been like for those early Christian believers as they gathered in somebody's home.

We thought about how exciting it would have been to hear Epaphroditus read the words written by the man who had first brought the good news of Jesus Christ to their city.

The opening to the letter demonstrated how fond Paul is of the Philippians, how he longs to be with them, and how concerned he is that they hold on to, and grow, in their love for and service of Jesus.

In the verses we've just listened to Paul addresses his current situation...

Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

Philippians 1:12-14

For people in the 1st century, being put in jail wasn't just an awful experience for the prisoner, it was a source of deep shame for those associated with the incarcerated person. Now, I know that prison is still an unpleasant place to be, and that friends and family feel the shame of the prisoner's crimes, but it would have been on another level for Paul and the people he is a spiritual leader to.

Think 'paedophile' or 'mother who kills her children' to get some idea of the stigma that came with imprisonment.

This is one of the reasons Paul is eager to let the Philippians know that his imprisonment is not a sign that God has abandoned him or his gospel ministry.

In fact, just like when he was imprisoned in Philippi, what has happened has given Paul access to a whole new mission field, this time the Roman palace guards!

One of my hobbies is photography (stick with me on this, it does have a bearing on the message!). I have come to realise that many photographers are obsessed with the latest and best cameras and lenses. It's a tendency that is jokingly referred to as 'GAS', Gear Acquisition Syndrome.

A photographer recently wrote a piece online about how the thing he most dreaded is that if he dies before his wife does that she will sell his camera gear for the price he told her he'd purchased it for.

There is, however, another saying among photographers that the best camera is the one you have with you. You may own the most superb, eye-wateringly expensive camera and lens in the world, but if you don't have them with you when the photo opportunity occurs, they are useless.

Too many Christians spend too long waiting for 'just the right time' to tell their friends, colleagues and family about Jesus. Waiting until they know enough theology. Waiting until they are better Christians. Waiting until they feel ready to speak. Waiting until they have all the right 'gear'.

And this time never comes. There will always be more to learn. There will always be things wrong in our lives. And many of us will never feel completely 'ready' to speak to others about our faith.

For Paul, the best time and place for a Christian to share the gospel is now, and wherever he happens to be. And for Paul, as he writes to the Philippians, it is in a Roman prison. And Paul has wasted no time in sharing his faith with the Roman guards.

This is such an important principle for us to understand, especially at this point in Northolt Park Baptist Church's life. It is all too easy to look at the negatives. We are an ageing congregation. There are so few of us. There are people suffering from a range of illnesses.

But Jesus is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. He has promised to be with us until the end of the age. He will never leave us or forsake us, even when we don't have a clue why we are in the situation we are in... which probably won't be in jail, but...

There are times when our job is simply to cling to his promises, and ask him to hold on to us, and to give us the courage to share the good news of his kingdom with those around us.

And, as Billy Graham was fond of saying, courage is contagious.

As the news about Paul's determination to preach the gospel, despite being in prison, has reached the Christian believers in Rome, many of them have been encouraged to 'proclaim the gospel without fear'.

Some of my most motivating moments are when I read or hear about someone in much worse circumstances than me who has not let that situation defeat them, but instead has risen to the challenge, overcoming great obstacles and turning defeat into victory.

It gives me a fresh perspective on life, jolting me out of my inward looking, self-pitying little world, and encouraging me to emulate the person who has done so much with much less than I have.

Paul's chains, rather than limiting the gospel, have enabled it to reach the 'whole Roman palace guard and to everyone else'.

The 'everyone else' is probably the guards' associates, friends and family with who they have shared the news about this strange prisoner who won't stop talking and writing about this Jesus guy.

And as well as giving Paul a new mission field, his refusal to let being in prison divert him from his mission has given the Roman Christians' faith

a Holy Spirit-inspired kick up the bum, increasing their confidence in the Lord, encouraging them to ‘proclaim the gospel without fear’.

The virtuous circle of a faith-filled life is again lived out. One that each one of us needs to work on minute-by-minute, day-by-day, year-by-year.

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Philippians 1:15-18a

So far, Paul has been positive about the believers in Rome. However Christians are forgiven but not perfect and while some of the Roman Christians are sharing the gospel with good intentions, it would seem that others are not.

We know from other New Testament letters that Paul was a ‘Marmite’ person, people tended to love him or hate him. And it would seem that there are Christians in the Roman church who fall into the latter camp.

We don’t know much about them. They are not ‘false teachers’, Paul says they are preaching the gospel, but it would seem their motives for preaching it were envy, rivalry and selfish ambition.

In any group of people, there will be those who want to be ‘first’. Whose overwhelming priority is to have their opinions heard and agreed with.

And this faction would seem to fit in that category, using Paul’s imprisonment as an opportunity to increase their status within the church, possibly even saying that his imprisonment is proof of God’s disapproval of Paul’s ministry.

And Paul’s response to this?

‘But what does it matter?’ Or, to use a modern way of putting it...

‘Whatever!’

Paul is learning that whether God breaks him out of jail, as he did at Philippi, or decided not to, as he has in Rome, the gospel is never chained. And while the best motive for preaching Christ is love, the most important thing is that Christ is preached, even when the motives may be suspect.

This is a good message for someone like me to hear. There are times when I’m listening to a podcast and I find myself distracted by a minor point that I disagree with, rather than concentrating on the good things they are talking about.

And, as I said earlier, it reminds us that we must not wait until we are perfect before we share the gospel with others. There are levels at which we all harbour envy, rivalry and selfish ambition along with a host of other imperfections, but that does not negate the power of the gospel.

And, as Paul says, ‘because of this I rejoice’.

And Paul hasn’t finished rejoicing...

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God’s provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Philippians 1:18b-21

This is one of the places where we see Paul at his most human, wrestling with what it means to be a Christian this side of heaven. Paul sincerely believes that through the prayers of believers and the power of the (triune) God that he is going to be released from prison, this is probably what he means by ‘deliverance’.

But he is also aware that it is possible that he will be tried and executed by the Roman authorities. I find it strangely comforting that even a spiritual giant like Paul is not certain about what is going to happen.

There are Christians who believe that if you 'get your act together' with God that you will sail safely through life. I have no idea where people get this idea from. It is certainly not from any of the 66 books of the Bible.

For Paul the most important thing is that while he is still alive that he makes sure the good news of Jesus Christ is made known to as many people as possible.

And he wants the Philippian believers to know that even if this means him dying at the hands of a Roman executioner (something that culturally would also be a source of great shame), that even this will promote the message of Jesus.

And this is what makes our Christian faith so powerful. While death is always intimidating, and a source of sadness for those who mourn the passing of a loved one, for the Christian it is not the end, but the continuation and fulfilment of our life with Christ.

As Paul writes, 'For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain'.

And so he continues...

If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

Philippians 1:22-26

Here we see Paul continuing to think about his current situation and about what is going to happen to him. He knows that for Christians

death is not the end. That because of Jesus' death and resurrection, that when he dies he will spend eternity with Christ.

This truth is so important to Paul that he hangs the authenticity of the gospel on it. (1 Corinthians 15).

And for Paul, there must have been times when dying seemed like an attractive option. His life since Jesus chose him to be his messenger to the Gentiles had not been an easy one, as he writes to the Corinthians...

I have been in prison... been flogged... been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have laboured and toiled and gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and gone without food; I have been cold and naked.

2 Corinthians 11:23-27

In these verses, Paul is sarcastically boasting to a faction in the Corinthian church who are competing with Paul for authority, much like the Roman Christians we have just read about.

Paul concludes his list of sufferings with the following words...

Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

2 Corinthians 11:28-29

And, once again, this is exactly what is going through his head as he writes to the Philippian church.

Paul knew that God had commissioned him to establish communities of Christian believers across the known world. He knew that the Philippian believers were part of God's plan to establish his kingdom here on earth, and Paul wanted to be a part of seeing them grow in their faith.

So, Paul is genuinely torn between the desire to leave all the troubles of this life behind, and the desire to play his part in furthering the message of the gospel. As he sat there in the Roman jail, striving to find just the right words to say to his friends in Philippi, the idea of no longer having to struggle must have seemed very attractive.

And who hasn't had days when they've felt like that? You might be feeling it right now. And Jesus knows how you're feeling, and he wants to help you.

Despite all of the challenges that face him, Paul is able to decide that he wants to... 'continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith'.

And for each one of us, that should be our resolve until we die or until Jesus returns, to continue to progress **joyfully** in our faith, encouraging and being encouraged by our Christian sisters and brothers.

And this is a decision. A moment-by-moment decision. Paul could have looked at his prison walls. At the guards he was chained to. He could have mithered over the Roman Christians who were bad-mouthing him.

But he decides to choose another lens (another camera analogy) with which to view his situation. The lens of the gospel. The good news of Jesus Christ. And this lens helps us to gain a proper perspective on life.

The life we are living now is important. The life we are living now is good, even with all the bad things that happen. But it is not all there is. And this helps us to hold on to our lives a little less tightly.

Paul's reason for wanting to be reunited with the Philippians is so that he can be a part of his Christian family, using his gifts to help them grow

(progress) joyfully in their faith, so that they will be able to boast about the goodness of Christ Jesus.

Paul was able to look past the chains that bound him, and to realise that he was more free than the Roman guards. And like he had done in prison at Philippi, he turns his situation into an opportunity to share the good news of Jesus with those around him.

We all have plenty of things that are not perfect in our lives, that could keep us imprisoned in self-pity and doubt. Let us each ask God to help us see beyond our troubles and trials, and to joyfully boast about the goodness of Christ Jesus to the people we meet, in the way that we live, and the words that we speak.

Amen!